

Sunday 1 October 2006: Harvest

Sharing the Harvest

Letters provide windows into other lives and cultures. These letters from around the world are true stories reflecting on themes of harvest and the struggle for life:

A Letter from the Middle East

I don't know your name, so I can't head this letter in the conventional way. But I heard you die, and take a number of other lives with yours, that morning in Baghdad six weeks ago.

It was the loudest bomb explosion we had heard for some time in our office...obviously pretty close. I went out on to the verandah. I could see a mushrooming plume of smoke and flame and dust four hundred yards away at most, just on the other side of the roundabout where Saddam Hussein's statue was pulled down on April the 9th 2003.

Moments later I could see exactly how you and your victims died. After I stepped back into the office one of the television news agencies started sending pictures from a camera on top of the Palestine hotel that had captured the whole incident in the street directly below. I saw your bus pull in towards the side of the road, then explode, scattering debris and starting fires around it. Just as I was asking myself whether you, the bomber, were driving the bus or were a passenger...was it a suicide bombing or had you meant to leave the bomb and run and your timing went wrong...the police were reporting the initial death toll. Five. It was later to rise.

And later to be overshadowed that same day by other bombings with a bigger casualty toll. Another day in Iraq that produced a harvest of death, when it is a harvest of new life and opportunities that the overwhelming majority of Iraqis crave for.

Each time I come to your country people talk so proudly of its rich heritage. Some still slip into using the old names for its provinces...Babylon, Ninevah. In this cradle of the creeds, cradle of civilizations, people tell me how comfortably the followers of Islam, Christianity and Judaism once lived side by side, without any tension. One man always reminds me that Jews owned a number of the houses and businesses in his area and he says he would like to see them come back, though he adds that he doesn't expect it to happen soon.

The long-running conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians...the more recent conflict in Lebanon...the violence in Iraq...some say they are all examples of the way the troubles of the wider Middle East are interlinked. I have no idea what your motives were in bringing your bomb to just down our street that day, what led you to extinguish your own life and those of others. If you felt you had some kind of religious endorsement, that seems to me to be immensely sad.

I was going to say that I wish you could have listened to Iraqis I meet who put aside their fears every single day to lead their lives as best they can -- to go to work, to get their children to school, to go shopping -- hoping that things will get better but knowing that at any moment there could be a message, a phone call, with bad news. But then you will have heard that for yourself...it's the experience of so many people, especially in Baghdad and certain other cities and towns anyway.

Life and death are so close to one another in too much of the Middle East. One moment that unexpected sign of hope that speaks of the blessings of God. The next...hope snuffed out. Can we say that the harvest has been safely gathered in while there are fields that are not bountiful, but filled with blood?

Mike Wooldridge

A letter from Solomon Islands in the South Pacific

Today 20th September and the feast day of an Englishman and first missionary Bishop to Melanesia. He was martyred in these islands in 1871. He was a man of peace who loved the people and believed in the indigenous Church. He must be rejoicing to see the harvest of the seed he planted. All week people have been arriving from surrounding villages and islands to join the celebration. The community has erected temporary shelters and extended verandas and vacated their own houses so that all the visitors can be accommodated. More than 5000 people arrive in time for the weekend and feast day. The taps dry up under the strain. No one complains, water is carried half a mile from the river. No one is bossing, or shouting, or angry, there is an atmosphere of joy and celebration. The community is working together with a harmony which remains a mystery to the overseas guests. Contingents of volunteers materialise to grate kasava, chop firewood, husk coconuts, unload swinging pigs from poles and baskets of yam they have carried for miles often across rivers. No one pays, no one is turned away, no one is sure where all the food has come from or who is feeding who, but like the feeding of the 5000 again and again there is enough for everybody. It is the miracle of reciprocity.

It is harvest time and celebration is greater among who have also known poverty. In the Church the Gloria will become a hymn of Melanesian praise. The Brothers in their customary dress sing and dance and the liturgy lives within the culture. They weave backwards and forwards with carved frigate birds in their hands, rising and swooping and the whole church echoes with drums, rattles and the roaring harmony of their voices. It seems even the stones on the ground will dance and sing. Later 5000 people will sit down on the ground together around half a mile of banana leaves spread with the fruits of the harvest. And the cry goes up **“Celebrate”**.

Richard Carter

A Letter from South Africa

Seven street kids came into our Church tonight- with bare feet and bad attitudes.

Disarmingly cute, alarmingly tough.

The youngest who looks no older than six- doesn't smile.

No one knows how to reach them - we cannot touch their world.

Church - first singing, then the prayers, reading and sermon and then communion.

The street kids confidently approach the communion rail to take the bread and drink from the cup.

Impatiently they wait there, their grubby hands reach up, correctly cupped, outstretched, waiting to be filled with the bread of life.

Its hardly filling, just a small piece of sliced bread, the crust still on, broken into pieces

A sip of wine sucked up with eager lips.

Then that's it.

One young opportunist stays at the altar rail with his cupped hands still outstretched hoping for some more crumbs from the Lord's table. The priest obliges offering a second helping of the

Body of Christ – given for you - and his blood – shed for you. All the boys have come back for seconds.

Finally when the elements are exhausted the street children are told it is finished and that they must go back to their seats. The small boy with the grubby hands is gently picked up and carried away from the rail, his hands are still cupped and outstretched.

One lady at the back of the church gives them some loaves of bread before they disappear into the night

The young pastor knows of the heartbreak of this cruel city.

“We must respect the holy communion, he says “and we must also respect hunger”.

I wonder whether anyone is listening.

Jeff Thompson

A letter from Susannah Woodd from Malawi

Let me tell you about Monday, my first day working at St Luke’s. I walk out of my house to a view of Malosa mountain tinged pink by the morning light and walk past the nursing school towards the hospital. As I approach the maternity ward I can hear a strange musical wailing coming from just outside. As each mid-wife arrives for the handover the same question is asked – ‘a woman has died?’ And the reply – ‘No, it was just a baby.’ ‘Oh, I thought it must be a mother with that crying.’ And there is relief that a mother hasn’t died but surprise that so much fuss is being made over a baby’s death.

Then the clinicians meet to discuss cases: an 8 year old boy who was killed in a road traffic accident, people with chest infections that aren’t improving so need testing for TB and HIV, people with known HIV and TB who have died. There is a lot of death. And then an argument about whether morning tea can still be provided for the clinicians because there isn’t enough money in the budget. The argument runs on and the meeting ends late, after 9 o’clock.

In the afternoon I join Hanna on a visit to St Martin’s, the sister hospital which is still managed by St Luke’s. It lies in a stunning location on the lakeshore. They have 100 beds, an operating theatre and 2 months ago started an HIV treatment programme. The only doctor is on holiday for 3 weeks so the place is being run by one clinical officer, supported by 10 nurses and 2 medical assistants. We drive back the scenic route from St Martin’s, up the escarpment with views back over the lake, sparkling in the sun. And down the other side, passing women wrapped in brightly patterned cloth with babies on their backs and buckets on their heads. Children in uniform returning from school, and men pushing loaded bicycles. The ground reddens and the shadows lengthen as the golden evening light spreads over the plain.

Happy harvest festival

Susannah

A letter to a new born child (An extract from Fergal Keane’s *Letter to Daniel*)

“Your coming into the world has turned me upside down and inside out. My dear son, we have wanted you and waited for you and dreamed about you and now you are here no dream can do

justice to you. So much that seemed essential to me has, in the last few days, taken on a different colour.

I have lived a life that on occasions has veered close to the edge: I have seen war zones, natural disasters, human misery, darkness in all its shapes and forms.

In a world of insecurity and ambition and ego, it's easy to be drawn in, to take chances with our lives, to believe that what people do or say about us is reason enough to gamble with death. Now looking at your sleeping face, inches away from me, listening to your occasional sigh and gurgle, I wonder how I could ever thought glory and prizes and praise were sweeter than life. What a gift your life is to me, beyond all my imaginings.

And it is also true that I am pained, perhaps haunted is a better word, by the memory, suddenly so vivid now, of each suffering child I have come across on my journeys. To tell you the truth, it's nearly too much to bear at this moment to even think of children being hurt or abused and killed. And yet looking at you the images come flooding back. Ten year old Andi Mikail dying from napalm burns on a hillside in Eritrea, how his voice cried out, growing ever more faint when the wind blew dust onto his wounds. The two brothers, Domingo and Juste, in southern Angola. Juste, two years old and blind, dying from malnutrition, being carried on seven year old Domingo's back. And Domingo's words to me "He was nice before, but now he has the hunger"

Last October in Afghanistan, as you my son, were growing in your mother, I met Sharja, aged twelve. Motherless, fatherless, guiding me through the grey ruins of her home, everything was gone she told me. And I knew that for all her tender years. She had learned more about loss than I would be likely to understand in a lifetime.

My new born son, these memories explain some of my fierce protectiveness I feel for you, the tenderness and the occasional moments of blind terror when I imagine anything happening to you."

Yes, and the deep longing to somehow share this father's love.